

## **Publications**

### **Explaining the New Europe**

**by Herman Lebovics**

I very much appreciated George Steinmetz's taking Europe from its gilded closet so we can see it in a better light with more space to think. [1] As a European historian who has written about several countries, I have consistently refused to teach a course in national history. The unit of historical measure was wrong for the kinds of questions that have interested me, that I thought important. As I confronted problems in historical explanation in French history, I came to recognize, like George Steinmetz, that it is time to acknowledge that the essentialized core unit Europe is ill-adapted to explain what goes on in the space from Ireland to Russia and from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean.

But aren't the changes that Steinmetz urges well under way? Some of us—primarily historians and anthropologists—have integrated the colonial into the history of Europe. Some of us—again largely the same disciplines—are paying careful attention to the reading of “texts.” As for the humanities, well, we incorporate a few of their ideas, don't we? And history is a suspect, yet tolerated, discipline in the field. There is a strong presentist bias in the way European Studies has been understood that, in recent years, has kept me and other historians away from greater participation. But the tectonic plates are shifting; what is Steinmetz sturming und dranging about? Immanuel Wallerstein and his Committee's Gulbenkian Commission Report, *Open the Social Sciences*, evidences that we have not in fact done these things.[2] The stonewalling, I think, has taken three major forms.

First, it is true that in my area of French history, the cultural and colonial dimensions of European history are not only accepted by colleagues, but many of them insist that we have always been speaking in prose. And then, second, on the part of too many practitioners of postcolonial, humanist-inflected history, we find the hip-rhetorical shift carried out only rhetorically. Liberal sprinkling on the pages of the funny new words (postcolonial, alterity, imbrication, recuperate, even culture, etc.), like salt and pepper, give a bland dish some chic, if not much new explanatory power. So, I agree with Steinmetz, we are not there yet.

This brings me to where “there” is today. Europe, of course, has always been an idea, a discourse, a project that has been discussed backwards and forwards in history. It won't stay put. But that is not a peculiarity of Old Europe. Consider both the pre- and postcolonial histories of nations in the Middle East, Africa, or South Asia. With changing local boundaries always, with changing larger political entities always, including sometimes states, with the colonial contributions always, and with changing relations to other equally complex parts of the world always. Here then is the possibility for the third way of avoiding re-thinking Europe. The soft refusal which the additive process covers—sure, interest in the political, plus the social, and now add the cultural; or yes, now Spain, Eastern Europe, Turkey, North Africa are part of the story—yields no coherent theoretical practices. Perhaps like Newton, we need to invent a new social science calculus (metaphor!) for constantly changing values of space and time. I accept Steinmetz's invitation to begin our methodological reflections so as to be able to study new terrains in better ways. Let me offer a brief story to demonstrate the need for a paradigm shift. I cling to

narrative as still the best way to gain the readers' attention, and I don't believe historical work is any the less scientific, as my French social science colleagues say, for it.

Consider José Bové and friends' non-literary deconstruction, in August 1999, of the McDonald's going up in Millau in the Larzac. Bové was a hero of the battle which raged for the whole of the 1970s to resist the confiscation of about one hundred sheep farmers to expand the local military base. The base was to be enhanced so troops might be trained to fight new kinds of wars in and against the ex-colonies. The farmers from this nowhere place supplied milk for the making of Roquefort cheese, the major local cash crop. Much of the cheese was sold internationally, with the US being a major consumer. The 109 farmers were fighting for a culture. The farms were not very remunerative; little space for rational choice theory here. They were quickly joined by other regionalists in France, the new ecologists, religious pacifists, the big-city left (especially the PSU), members of the new social movements of other places and nations (the Kanaks of New Caledonia), members of the American Indian Movement, South American peasant leaders, and the representatives of the farmers who were resisting confiscation of their land to build Tokyo's new airport.

At the beginning of this struggle, in the late 1960s and early 1970s more than sixty senior colonial administrators sent home by decolonization joined the newly-created Ministry of Cultural Affairs to reconstruct and re-centralize the battered and fragmenting metropolitan culture. Same work, different setting, Emile Biasini, the first of them reasoned.[3] And toward the end of that struggle, in the late 1970s, social scientists, especially the anthropologists, also chased out of the former colonies, found work back in the metropole and in the same ministry. On the eve of the elections of 1981 the government's national culture project seemed to be failing. A classic Bourdieusian capital swap was done. Dipping into the state budget, President Giscard d'Estaing was willing to make posts available for the unemployed anthropologists. They in turn were willing to invest their scientific capital in refuting l'ethnologie sauvage, as a key statement of the project put it. Via a new agency in the ministry, they worked on the project of chilling out the various powerful regionalist movements of which the Occitane-Larzac was one of the most successful.

When the Socialists swept the elections in 1981, the Paysans de Larzac, as they called themselves, won too. Mitterrand called off the base expansion. Now in 1999 Bové was challenging the imperium of the United States in response to the prohibitory duties the US had put on Roquefort cheese as punishment for the French blocking American hormone-feed beef imports. Bové has become a major figure in the global anti-globalization movement. And Europe has become one of the homelands of anti-globalization.

So, rebels and their enemies show a keen understanding of both issues of regional cultural domination (Paris and Occitanie) and those of the overseas colonial kind (New Caledonia and the ex-colonies). The relation between French economic policy in the EU and American pressures on European markets are illuminated here in this case of a new cosmopolitan regionalism. Questions of class and class conflict take on new dimensions seen here as cultural conflict. We see the post-68 left rebuilding itself at Larzac and at LIP (même combat). And colonial administrators and social scientists returning to use their skills and knowledge to pacify the metropolitan backcountry. And everywhere the different struggles are intertwined and acting back on each other. The Peasants of Larzac, their activist allies, and the

politicians of all camps understood this. Once more, seemingly unrelated local events turn out to have large causal consequences. The magistrate who sentenced José Bové to a harsh—for trespassing and vandalism—three months in prison clearly understood, too, how lines of force run from the villages to a world greater than Europe and back again. [4]

Such inquiries are increasingly needed simply to understand Europe. That is why a new a new epistemology of our historical knowledge of Europe is necessary and overdue. We should imbed our accounts in the emergent global episteme. That is to say, we should research and write so as to aid the reader to keep in mind at any important moment 1) the local, the national, the European, and the global, 2) as well as the effects of their mutual reflexivity. George Steinmetz's useful essay has pointed out the right path.

**Notes:**

1. Contact the author at [Herman.Lebovics@sunysb.edu](mailto:Herman.Lebovics@sunysb.edu).
2. Immanuel Wallerstein et. al, *Open the Social Sciences: Report of the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences* (Stanford University Press, 1996).
3. Emile Biasini, *Grands Travaux: De l'Afrique au Louvre* (Paris: 1995).
4. This example is drawn from my book *Imperial Republic: Paris and its Possessions in the Twilight of Colonialism* (Duke University Press, 2004).